

GREENE COUNTY GHOST MUSIC



by James Adams



Introduction, Sources, and Thanks

This zine is about the life and career of Bela Lam and His Greene County Singers. Greene is located in central Virginia, just north of Albemarle and the city of Charlottesville. I moved to Greene two years ago after spending most of my early days in Page County, just to the west, where Bela Lam himself was born and brought up. It's beautiful country and it's home, for good and ill.

I first read about Bela Lam in a book called "The Old, weird America" by Greil Marcus. That book is deeper than most rivers and new and fascinating references come quick and thick. I'm quite certain that I didn't realize, at that time, that the Greene County Greil referenced was the Virginia version. It was only later, when I doubled back doing research for this zine, that I learned something I already knew. Greil also wrote about Bela and his family in a 2008 article called "Sam McGee's 'Railroad Blues' and Other Versions of the Republic" for The Threepenny Review. That article has this short and perceptive quote, about the sound of Bela Lam and His Greene County Singers, that says more than all of my pages combined:

(Their music is) "of a conviction so murderously complete, so uninterested in what you think you believe, that suddenly you feel very small -- on the outside of a story that is yours whether you like it or not."

Amen.

David E. Nealon is the authority on Bela Lam and his family and without his research and writing this zine would not exist. Nealon wrote the single best history of the group -- an article called "we Don't Sing Like That Now" that was published in the Summer 2002 issue of Virginia Cavalcade magazine. He also wrote

insightful and deeply researched liner notes to the "Virginia Roots: The 1929 Richmond Sessions," a 2002 reissue set on Outhouse Records that features four songs by Bela and his kin. Apparently, Nealon also wrote his Masters Thesis at UNC Chapel Hill on Bela Lam and his family but I wasn't able to track down a copy before finishing this zine. I'm sure that it's great, based on everything else he wrote about the group.

Joe Bussard has all of the Bela Lam and His Greene County Singers records and if it wasn't for him I wouldn't have been able to hear them all. Read through the liner notes of a classic reissue set, including the few that have Bela Lam songs, and more often than not you'll find that the recordings came from Joe's collection. It's uncanny. When I couldn't find the songs I needed to hear for this project I asked Joe and he sent me a tape. He's awesome like that.

The photographs included here are mostly stolen from the internet (largely from family genealogy websites) or Nealon's published writings on Bela Lam. I took the picture of the South River Methodist Church. I also built the map (overlayed on a stolen base) and found the newspaper clippings. Those come from the Greene County Record (Stanardsville, Virginia) and The Daily News Record (Harrisonburg, Virginia). There are several worthwhile discographies online that comprehensively detail the work of Bela Lam and His Greene County Singers. The version here is a hybrid that I built by taking a little bit from all of them. I used all of the above for my notes about the songs, along with some additional (mostly internet) research. The vintage advertisements are taken from Sears Roebuck catalogs of the 1930s.

Prices in this *Sears* catalog are for mail orders only

The art on the cover of this zine and its CD is by Taylor W. Rushing of Madison, Wisconsin. Taylor is an enormously talented artist who is able to tell complex stories with deceptively simple illustrations. Much of his work touches on the music and musicians of the 78-rpm era and Taylor himself is a supremely knowledgeable and insightful fan of hillbilly music. No one was more qualified to do the art for this project and I'm honored that Taylor agreed to participate. Check out Taylor's work on the internet (taylorwrushing.com) or Instagram ([twrushing](https://www.instagram.com/twrushing)) and buy something from him at: taylorwrushing.bigcartel.com

I got the idea for this zine in January 2018 and did much of the research in the Spring. When summer got hot I got bored and lazy and drank too much beer. We reunited during the heavy rains that hit Virginia in September. I did most of the writing and typing and assembly during the 2018 MLB and NASCAR playoffs. It was a long time coming but it was mostly fun. I hope you like it.

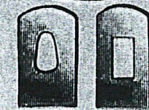
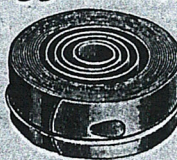
This zine is number 4 in a series on Virginia music history (collect them all!). Bela Lam recorded in '27 and '29 so I made 56 copies. You're holding number 39.

Phonograph Main Springs

Finest Spring Steel

Thicker, heavier, and specially tempered to resist breaking. Will not jump. Main-springs connect with the spring barrels in different ways; most have "Oval" ends; some have "Square" ends; still others are "Oval" at one end and "Square" at the other. In ordering, read closely the descriptions and then consult the illustrations at right, which show each type of end. Be sure your measurements are accurate. Order lubricant when you order the spring. See Silvertone Mainspring Lubricant at right. If in doubt about the spring or springs which you need simply send us POSTPAID your spring barrel and we will put in a single spring for \$1.50, double spring for \$2.50 and three springs for \$3.00. These prices include the cost of the springs. If special sizes are required other than those listed below, an additional charge will be made.

39c EACH And Up



Oval End Square End Measure Sizes Carefully

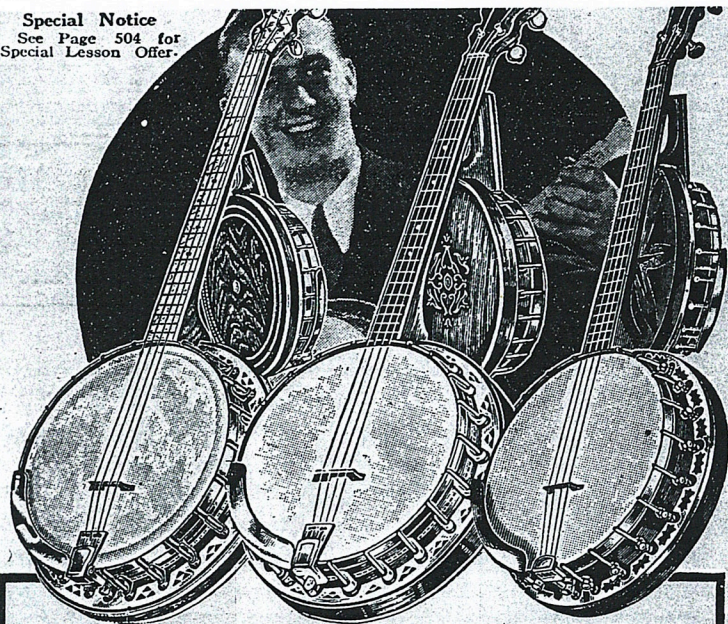


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ALL-STEEL
PHONOGRAPH
NEEDLES**

- Made of the finest steel obtainable.
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Good needles mean good reproduction. Improperly pointed and tempered needles wear out records. Ours are guaranteed to satisfy. Packed 500 of each tone in metal box.

Cat. No.	Tone	Quantity	Shpg. Wt.	Price
12 K 61 31	Medium	500	5 oz.	29c
12 K 61 32	Loud	500	5 oz.	29c
12 K 61 33	Extra Loud	500	6 oz.	29c
12 K 61 29	Giant	500	6 oz.	29c



Pleases Professionals

- Shell and resonator veneered with beautiful burl walnut, inlaid with colored wood.
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- 13½ inch celluloid bound convex resonator.
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- Modern 23-inch scale.
- Best quality white calfskin head. Ceared pegs.
- Metal tone ring.
- 20 professional brackets.
- 12 Lesson Certificate (see page 504), Instruction Book, pick included.

A real Orchestra Model Tenor Banjo need not be expensive if you buy direct from Sears who buy direct from the factory. Shpg. wt. 13 lbs. Not Prepaid.

12 E 532 \$24.98

Cash.....
Easy Payment Price, \$4 down, \$4 a mo. **\$27.50**

12 E 5532—With

"Kant Krack" Side opening Case. Shpg. wt. 16 lbs. Cash.....**\$30.75**

Easy Payment Price, \$5 down, \$5.50 a mo. **\$33.85**

Use Easy Payment Order Blank in Back of Catalog.

Mahogany Veneered

- Non-warping 11-in. shell.
- Genuine mahogany veneered and handsomely inlaid. Calfskin head.
- 13½-in. bound convex mahogany veneered resonator.
- Heavy metal filler ring.
- Marquetry design decalcomania on resonator back.
- 3-ply neck of mahogany and maple.
- Bound ebonized fingerboard. Adjustable tail-piece.
- Modern 23-in. scale.
- Patent non-slip pegs.
- Arm rest and 20 nickel plated brackets.
- 12 Lesson Certificate (see page 504), Instruction Book and pick incl.

A practical Tenor Banjo you will be proud to own. See all the attractive features Sears price includes, then start your lesson course with this good banjo. It's easy! Not Prepaid.

12 E 528—Shpg. wt.

11 lbs.....**\$15.45**

12 E 5528—With

"Biltwel" Black canvas Case. Shpg. wt.

12 lbs.....**\$16.95**

A Banjo "FITS IN"

- 11-inch Birdseye maple veneered, walnut finish.
- 13-inch convex resonator.
- Patent Non-slip Pegs.
- Ebonized fingerboard inlaid position dots.
- Modern 23-inch scale.
- Arm rest—20 brackets.
- 12 Lesson Certificate (See page 504). Instruction Book and pick incl.

At the party, or in the student orchestra, the banjo player fits in. This group enables anyone to start with a good instrument. Not Prepaid.

12 E 522 \$11.75

Shpg. wt. 10 lbs.

12 E 5522 \$12.95

With "Biltwel" black canvas case. Shpg. wt. 12 lbs.

Low Priced Tenor Banjo for the Beginner

11-inch hardwood shell.

12 brackets; non-slip pegs.

No resonator. Pick and 12-Lesson Certificate. Shpg. wt., 7 lbs.

12 E 520

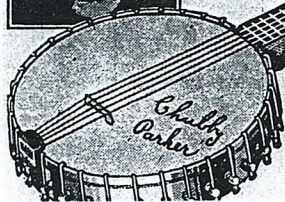
Not Prepaid.

Less Case.....**\$6.95**

5-STRING BANJOS

You Too, Can Play Like Chubby

\$9.25



- Duplicate of Chubby Parker's autograph on calfskin head.
- 11-inch metal, nickel plated wood lined shell with lower edge spun over wire.
- Maple finish neck, ebonized fingerboard.
- 30 Brackets. Patent non-slip pegs.
- Certificate for 12 Lessons (See Page 504) and instruction book included.

Watch the fun start whenever you appear with your chummy Chubby Parker "Lil Ole Time Banjo." Instruction book shows you how to play it! Not Prepaid

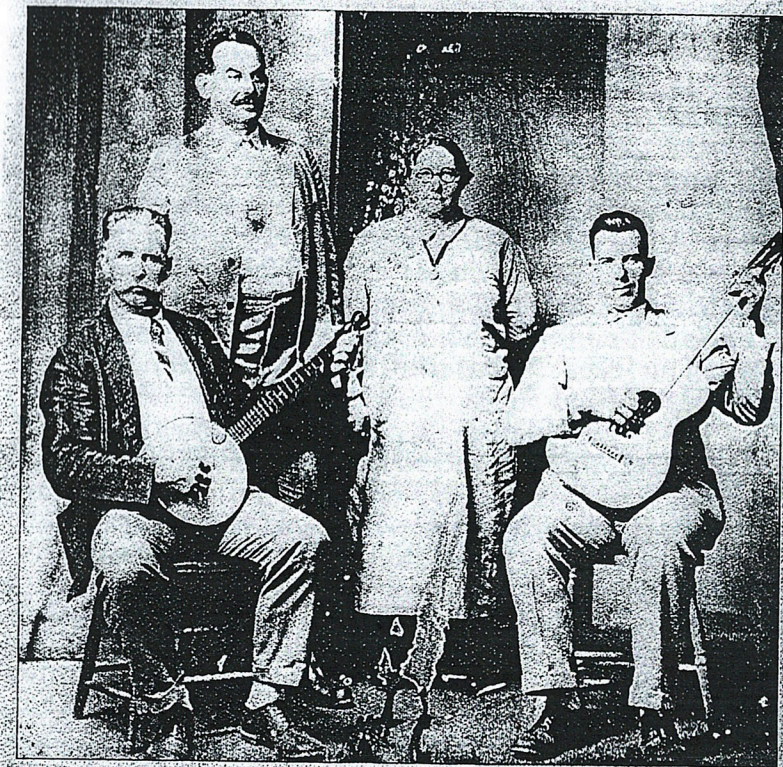
12 E 509—Shpg. wt., 9 lbs.....9.25

12 E 5509—With "Biltwel" black canvas case.

Shpg. wt., 11 lbs.....**\$10.95**

Low Priced—Good Quality

11-in. metal shell, wood lined. 12 brackets. Excellent for the beginner. Certificate for 12 Easy Lessons (See Page 504) and instruction book included. Not Prepaid.



Bela Lam and His Greene County Singers
(From left: Bela Lam, John Paul Meadows,
Rose Lam, Alva Lam)

Part I: The Story

Bela Lam and His Greene County Singers weren't formed so much as they emerged from the families and music and ghosts that filled the hills. He was born in December 1874, in Jollett Hollow, along Naked Creek, up toward the crest of the Blue Ridge Mountains, near where Page County meets Madison and Greene counties and just east of Rockingham. His parents named him Zandervon ubeliah Lam. Everybody called him something that sounded like "Bee-Lee" but they all spelled it differently. On various documents you see it rendered: Beely, Bealy, Beale, Bealie, and, weirdly, Bela.

Bela's father was a day laborer and a farmer. Back then, and back there, everybody was a farmer. When he wasn't working, Bela's father was playing his fiddle or singing with his 13 children. Sometimes he'd get his people and all the neighboring families together at Big Meadows for food, fellowship, and singing. At church and picnics and family reunions and weddings and funerals and in the morning and before bed they would sing. The Lams were always singing. Bela was there, learning the songs and the style.

On 18 December 1900, Bela married Rozeliah Quintis Meadows in Harrisonburg. He called her Rose. She was from just over the crest of the Blue Ridge, on the Greene County side. She was also one of 13 children from a musical family. All her brothers and sisters would sing together and solo, including a younger brother named John Paul Meadows. John Paul was known to sing more than he talked.

Bela and Rose settled first on his side of the mountain, along Naked Creek, where he ran a mill and sold soda pop on the side. A year and a day after they were married, Bela and Rose welcomed a son and named him Alva. They'd have two more children who would not survive to adulthood.

First, and forever, Bela, Rose, John Paul, and Alva were kin who liked to sing together. Only later, when they went to the big city, did they become The Greene County Singers.

Like his father before him, Bela was always singing. He also learned the 5-string banjo. At church he took turns with Rose playing the organ. At home he sang with his wife and son. When his extended family would visit they'd all sit and sing. The same when hers came calling.

In 1910 Bela moved his wife and son over the ridge to her side of the mountain. We don't know why. Maybe it was because he wasn't making any money at the mill. He had an unprofitable habit of forcing customers to sit and listen to him sing when they came to grind their grain. Even when he didn't sing he had a habit of letting friends visit, use the mill, and leave without charge. They settled down the hill from John Paul's horse and sheep farm along Bull Yearling Run (Run). Bela found work as a house carpenter and bark peeler for a tannery. Of course he was a farmer, too. A few years later, when Alva was old enough to work, he found a job as a prison camp guard. He was a farmer too, of course. Whatever the work, when it came time to rest, there was singing. More years passed but there was always singing.

Somewhere and sometime in late 1926 or early 1927, John W. Evans from the Rockingham side of the mountain heard Bela singing with his wife, his son, and his brother-in-law. Evans owned a furniture store in Elkton. The big furniture trend in 1927 was phonograph machines housed in large wooden cabinets. Customers who purchased phonograph machines needed something to play on their new furniture, so store owners like Evans also sold records. Sometimes they were even tasked with spotting new and promising recording talent. Evans told Polk Brockman -- a rather notorious figure in the early recording (and "songwriting") industry -- about Bela and his singing family from the mountains. Brockman took the advice and offered Bela a deal with Okeh records: take a train up to New York City, stay in the fancy Union Square Hotel, and record some songs. Every song that Brockman accepted would earn Bela and his family \$25.

Bela accepted, of course.



My Little Buckaroo *You Showed Me the Way* *Moonlight and Shadows*

Conqueror RECORDS

- 10-Inch.
- Double-Sided.
- Finest Recordings.
- Perfect Tone.
- Long Lasting.

Compounded of finest materials to insure longer lasting records and undistorted tone quality. With proper care and frequent changing of needles, these records will last indefinitely... be a constant source of pleasure and entertainment. Order your favorites now.

Order by Catalog No. 12 F 6401. Give Selection Number and Second Choice. Shipping weights, 2 records, 1 pound 13 ounces; 5 records, 3 pounds 4 ounces; 10 records, 5 lbs. 14 oz.

Greene

DEV

VOLUME SEVENTEEN

The Greene County Paper

Greene County Singers Triumph

Mr. and Mrs. Belie Lamb, son, Elva, and Mr. John Paul Meadows, who signed up with the O'Keh Recording company, of New York city, to sing for six graphophone records for the sum of \$50 each and all expenses paid to and from their homes, returned to their homes at McMullan July 9, after a 5-day stay in the Metropolis.

These people were introduced as "The Quartette from the Blue Ridge Mountains," and their singing made a wonderful hit. It was something quite unusual for four persons to carry all notes of certain pieces of music.

Among the first records sung for and the one which made the largest hit that will be marketed will come out by Aug. 15, is "Row Us Over the Tide" (one side) and "See That My Grave is Kept Green" (other side). This record can be purchased at Mr. John Evans' store, Elkton, by Aug. 15. Mr. Evans heard this quartette sing about two years ago and made it first known to the New York company that they possessed rare voices.

The names of the other records sang were: "Listen to the Mocking Bird," "Poor Little Benny," "Two Little Girls in Blue," "My Dearest

May," "In the Sweet Bye and Bye," "Follow Jesus," "When the Roll is Called Up Yonder," "The Resurrection Morn," "The Sweet Story of Old" and "Little Maid."

They also played their own accompaniments to all their songs. Mr. Lamb played the banjo and his son the guitar.

It will be quite a pleasure to the people of Greene county to be able to purchase records sung by home talent and to know their splendid voices will be preserved for all time.

This quartette also sang at one of the large theatres in the city, where they received a great ovation.

They were splendidly entertained at the Union Square hotel while there. Capt. Sweeney and Lieut. DeMilt, former friends of these folks, entertained them royally by taking them to the chief places of interest and amusement in the city. Among one of the places visited was Coney Island.

They would have sung for the radio, but the program had been arranged for some months ahead.

They left for the trip from Elkton, going by Harrisburg and Philadelphia and returned by way of Washington.

The group probably didn't have a name when they left Virginia but when they returned from New York in middle-July 1927, they were Bela Lam and His Greene County Singers. The family recorded a total of 12 tunes (2 were never released) in sessions over two days in the city. When they had time off they visited Coney Island. Newspapers across the Shenandoah Valley carried stories of their journey and most quoted John W. Evans, who now had a stake in their success. If people in the Valley bought Bela's records, they'd probably buy them from John W. Evans.

Evans told the papers that Bela and his family were special indeed and that they played a wildly successful gig at a theatre in NYC. He said their music "will charm thousands when placed on the records." The first shellac 78 was available on 14 August, just a month and a week after Bela left the studio in New York: "See That My Grave is Kept Green" b/w "Row Us Over The Tide."

By then, Bela and his family were back on the mountain and life had largely returned to normal. It was summer and there was plenty of work on the farm: corn, peaches, rye, buckwheat, cherries, greens, and vegetables. There was still time for singing, of course. For a little while, bookings spiked as locals sought out and hired the group they read about in the paper - the one that went to the city to record those weird songs. Bela and his family sang at field days and pasture parties and picnics. It was a good summer.

But it wasn't so different from before. Wider fame (if they wanted it, or even knew it was a possibility, we don't know) was still a million miles away. Bela had already been paid for the songs they recorded. Royalties weren't really a thing yet. Anyway, Polk Brockman had a nasty habit of putting language in his contracts that transferred the rights to the songs he recorded to himself. It wouldn't have made a difference anyway. Hillbilly music was popular enough, but nobody was buying Bela Lam records.

The First Record By Mr. Belie Lam and His Greene County SINGERS Is Now on Sale

"How Up Over the Tide" coupled with "See That My Grave is Kept Green."

There will be six other Records by these wonderful artists.

They will be released at intervals of about 15 days apart.

These Records can be obtained from

JOHN W. EVANS

Weyers Cave, Va., and Elkton, Va.

ELKTON STORE OPEN EVERY WEDNESDAY AND THURSDAY.

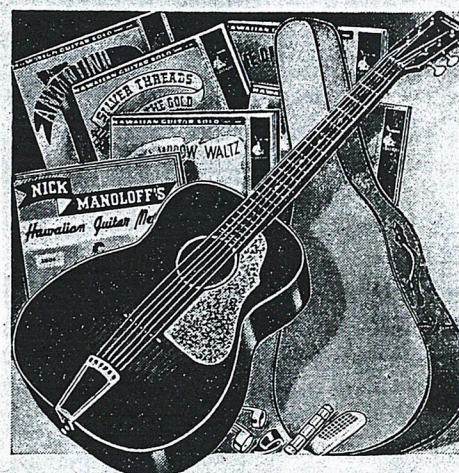
Records 75c. 10c extra for mailing.

1 sell OKEH and COLUMBIA RECORDS.

COME IN and hear the Wonderful Orthophonic Victrola.



HAWAIIAN GUITAR OUTFIT



Everything You Need... at Low Prices!

Special music (5 songs), instructions. Hawaiian steel outfit, steel bar, adjustable nut and three picks, guitar and case if desired... complete! An amazing value for beginner or performer. Hardwood body. High lighted polished walnut finish with spruce graining on top and curly maple grain on back and sides. Top edge and soundhole bound with white celluloid. Large celluloid guardplate in sparkling gold effect. Beautiful polished finish. Ebonized fingerboard with mother-of-pearl position dots. Vertical nickel plated type geared machine heads with metal bushings for string posts. May also be played regular or Spanish style. Certificate for 12 lessons. See Page 704.

12 H 248—Concert Size. Shipping weight, 10 pounds.	\$7.75
12 H 2248—With canvas carrying case. Shipping weight, 12 pounds.	\$9.35
12 H 249—Junior Size. Shpg. wt., 8 lbs.	7.45
12 H 2249—With canvas carrying case. Shipping weight, 9 pounds.	8.85

Mainspring Lubricant

The mainspring is the "heart" of your phonograph motor. Lengthen its life with the use of this fine graphite paste. For a three-spring motor two cans are needed. Shipping weight, 10 ounces.

12 K 6123—Each..... 19c



Still, on 15 October 1929, they got another chance. Brockman was always looking for another batch of songs to release on Okeh and turned to his branch manager in Richmond, Virginia to arrange a recording session. Rather than go through the trouble of finding new and untested talent, the branch manager, Charles Rey, first called on artists Okeh already recorded - like Bela. Then he turned to artists like fiddler "Babe" Spangler and The Tubize Royal Hawaiian Orchestra who performed on the newly founded WAVA radio station. The result was the diverse and varied "1929 Richmond Sessions" that would become an important statewide survey of contemporary Virginia music. Bela and his family contributed 4 songs (again, 2 additional songs were recorded but never issued) that Okeh would release in the subsequent months. But there were no hits in that batch of songs and they also sold poorly.

And, as they say, that was that. The phonograph recording career of Bela Lam and His Greene County Singers was over.

Bela kept singing of course, whenever there was a time or an opportunity. Later in life it was most often at home, or at the South River Methodist Church he attended with his wife.

Aged 70, Bela died at the UVA Hospital in Charlottesville three days after Christmas, 1944. Rose lived to the age of 77 and the year 1951. They are buried together in an unmarked graves in a family cemetery plot on land that once belonged to their family but is now part of the Shenandoah National Park.

Their son, Alva, died in 1963. Rose's brother, John Paul, outlived them all. Too sick to stand, he sang from his hospital bed, all the way to the end, on 6 June 1976.



BLUE RIDGE COUNCIL No. 149 Jr. O. U. A. M. will hold their ANNUAL FIELD DAY

-:- AT -:-

Elkton, Virginia,
Saturday, Aug. 20, 1927

A full day of amusements from
start to finish.

BASEBALL, TOURNAMENT
and all kinds of races and con-
tests. Music by a good
brass band.

Bealy Lam and His Quartette from
the Blue Ridge Mountains, and
Old Time Fiddlers.

Parade at 9:00 o'clock. Lawn
Party at Night. Come one and
all and enjoy yourself all day.
We will look for you.

Low Priced Reproducer

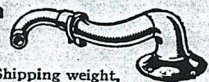
Metal diaphragm, nickel plated. Clearly reproduces the colorful beauty in the new style electrical recordings. Primarily intended for portable machines. Will not fit Edison, Columbia or Brunswick phonographs. Shpg. wt., 10 oz.

12K6169—2 1/2-in. diameter. 49c



Improved Tone Arm

Nickel plated. Tapered throw back style. Fits any cabinet-style phonograph, except Columbia and Edison. Shipping weight, 1 pound 8 ounces.



12 K 6161—For Cabinet Machines..... \$1.95

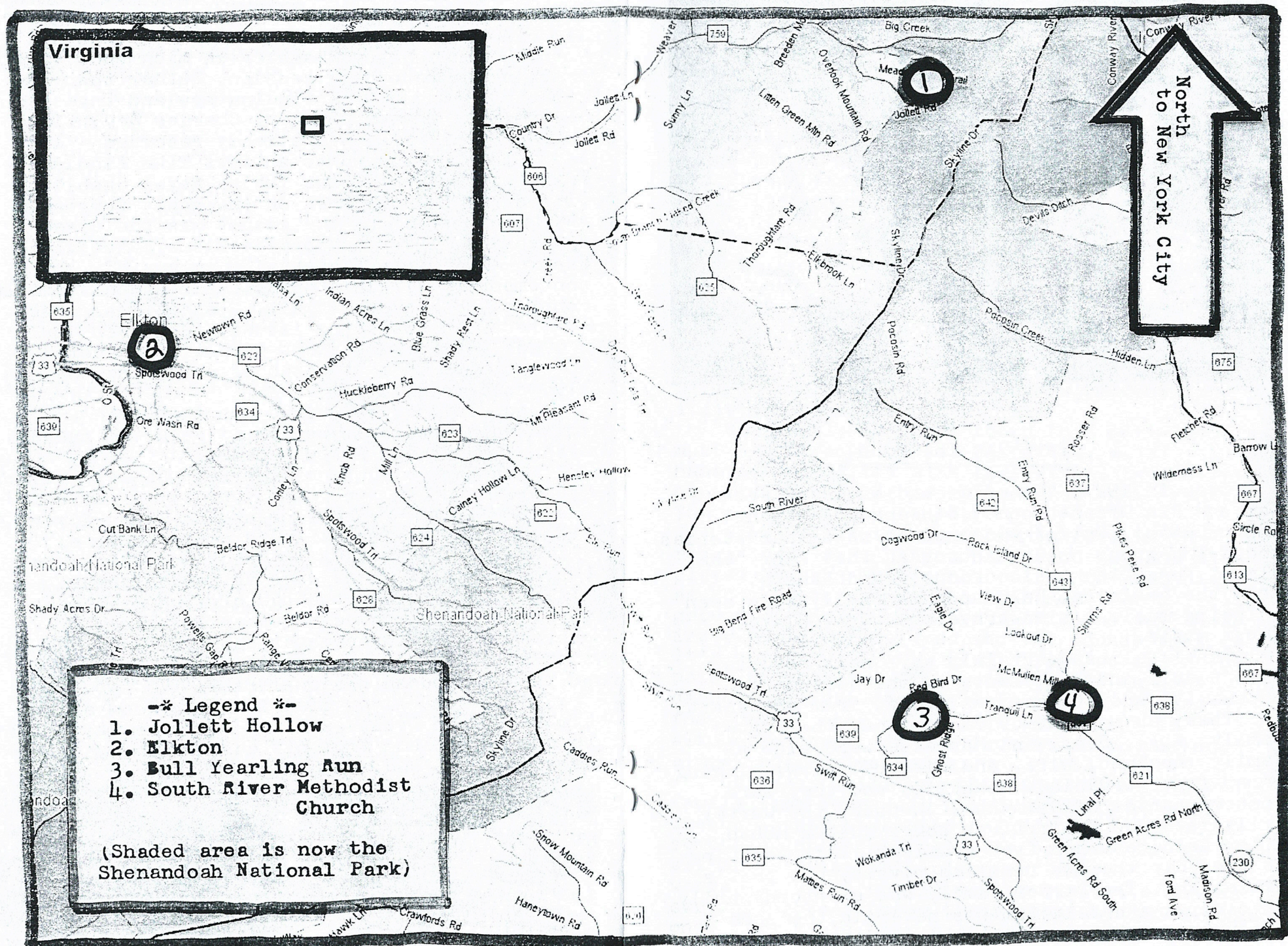
12 K 6162—For Portables. Fits almost every make. Shipping weight, 1 pound 6 ounces..... 95c

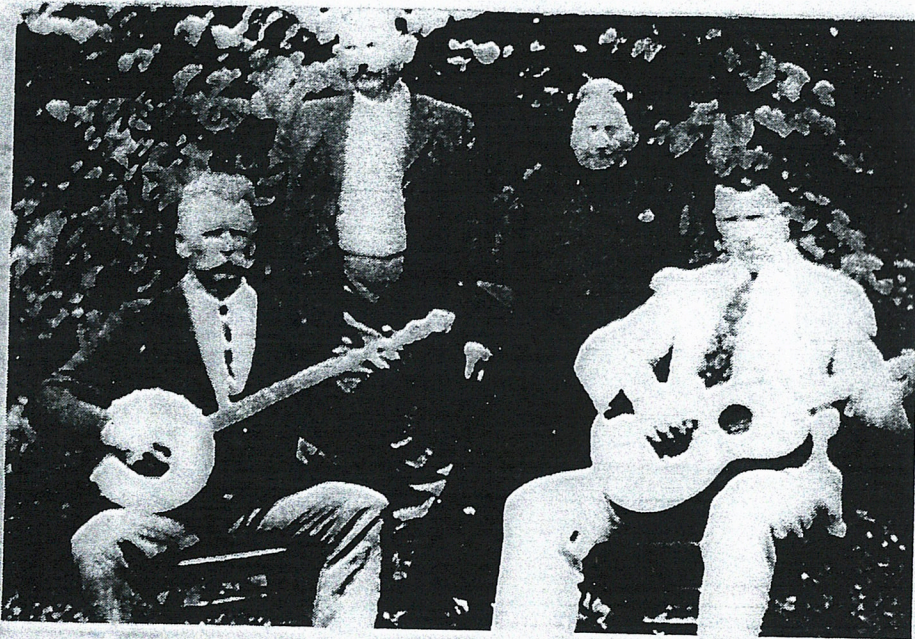
Virginia

North
to New York City

- * Legend *-**
1. Jollett Hollow
 2. Elkton
 3. Bull Yearling Run
 4. South River Methodist Church

(Shaded area is now the
Shenandoah National Park)





Part II: The Sound

Even in 1927, the music and style of Bela Lam and His Greene County Singers was strange and outdated. One of those first newspaper stories about the group pointed out that they sang "the almost forgotten music of our grandfathers." From the beginning, Bela and his family were seen as weird musical time-travelers. They played ghost music.

That's almost certainly why their records didn't sell and any chance at mainstream popularity and success was doomed from the start.

Take, as a point of comparison, the Carter Family. A.P., Sara, and Maybelle were also a family (husband, wife, and sister-in-law) singing group from Virginia's mountains and they were contemporaries of Bela Lam. In fact, the Carter Family recorded their first songs just a month after Bela returned from New York. It's tempting to consider the two families rivals, but that's misleading. The Carter Family was extraordinarily successful and Bela Lam was never in the same league.

Much of the difference was due to sound. The Carter Family played a brand of rural country / hillbilly music that sounded downright modern and jumpin' alongside Bela's records. It was varied and multi-dimensional and reflected many styles and influences, including syncopated instrumentation and the blues. Their songs commented on contemporary life and themes and forced their way into the imagination of their listeners. When the Carter Family sang about Clinch Mountain you could almost smell the air on the sunny side of those hills.

The songs that Bela and his family sang don't make you feel that way. For one, the themes are very different, and much more reminiscent of downer 19th century parlor tunes about death and dying, drunk dads, orphans, and the impending end of the world. There was also a batch of straight religious songs, gospel and hymns, focused on individual salvation.

But mostly it's the sound that makes Bela's music so strange and so difficult. It's haunted and filled with fog, almost impenetrable, especially because every tune has that frantic 78-rpm crackle and hiss.

Partly it's the instrumentation. On the recordings, Bela played banjo and his son Alva played guitar. That's not out of the ordinary, as those were common accompaniment for hillbilly groups of the era. Rather, it is the way those instruments were played and the sounds they made. It's chaotic, largely atonal, and rough to the point of abrasion. The notes go off in lost directions that don't always seem to belong to the current song. Sometimes the melody is altogether gone. It's a foundation of uneven, almost aggressive noise.

Stranger still was the singing. Bela and his family sang four part harmonies but, as the Greene County newspaper pointed out, "it was something quite unusual for four persons to carry all notes of certain pieces of music." In other words, it was a collection of disparate voices struggling to stretch their separate lines into one. It's basic, yet abstract and difficult.

More precisely, it was an antiquated mountain version of shape note singing - the musical notation style that was used to quickly teach groups of people to sing together. Most often associated with Sacred Harp singing, the shape note method was more popular and more commonly found in the second half of the 19th century. For whatever reason it lingered (or maybe didn't catch on) in Bela's part of Virginia for another 40 or 50 years. Everywhere else it was already considered music for old people.

Singing parts in Bela's family rarely varied. Most often Alva handled the lead melody, which was a soprano part that he sang a little lower than normal. Rose sang the high parts as an alto (sometimes called high baritone). Bela sang tenor, which by design would tend to blend into the other voices. John Paul sang bass. Regardless, the delivery is straight, almost monotone, unemotional, without any variations to stress any part of the lyric. To me, they sound like dead voices singing haunted songs.

Bela and his family probably learned this style of singing from two places: songbooks and traveling teachers.

Through most of the 19th century, Singers Glen, west of Greene County in Rockingham, was the center of a thriving religious music publishing industry that specialized in the seven-note shape system. The Funk, Ruebush, and Kieffer families all began publishing printed music beginning in the middle 1800s. Later, Ruebush and Kieffer teamed up to publish a monthly magazine called "Musical Million" that ran from 1870 to 1914. The Greene County Singers almost certainly knew the songs printed on its pages. They even recorded one Musical Million song, "Tell It Again," at the Richmond sessions.

Please LEND This Catalog to Your NEIGHBOR



Henry Lam, one of Bela's brothers, had a turn-of-the-century singing group called The Blue Ridge Singers. (Maybe they were also called The weaver Hollow Singers - it's unclear). An undated photo of the group shows Henry holding a copy of "The Temple Star," a shape note manual and songbook published by Ruebush-Kieffer in 1886. Clearly those publications and styles were in the air and somehow, decades later, still resonated with Bela and his family in the hills of Greene County.

Ruebush-Kieffer also dispatched traveling salesman instructors up and down the Shenandoah Valley, across the south, and as far out as the Midwest. Their job was to teach the shape note style and sell songbooks and magazines. They visited Page and Greene counties routinely and sometimes set up improvised schools where they'd teach for a few weeks before moving on to their next base and group of students and customers. Although they were trying to make money, the instructors also had a clear (and now quaint) goal of teaching rural Americans a musical style that was rooted in the local community and was progressively free from the boundaries of class and education. But it was also a system and business model fading into time. Whenever Bela Lam encountered the traveling teachers they were one visit closer to disappearing forever. Make no mistake, by 1927, when Bela led his family into a recording studio for the first time, the style and sound of the music they played was uncommon and old-fashioned. In retrospect it's strange that Polk Brockman -- or anyone else, for that matter -- thought those songs would sell.



South River Methodist Church in 2018.

Part III: The Songs

Altogether Bela Lam and His Greene County singers recorded 18 songs for the Okeh label in two sessions: New York (Thursday 7 July and Friday 8 July, 1927) and Richmond (Tuesday 15 October, 1929). Fourteen of those songs were released by Okeh and available for purchase. Four of the songs were never issued and -- so far as I know -- are lost and gone. Two of the unreleased songs were recorded in New York ("Two Little Girls in Blue" / "Listen To The Mocking Bird") and two were recorded in Richmond ("I Had A Darling Little Girl" / "watermelon Smiling on the Vine").

What follows is a discography of the released songs by Bela Lam and His Greene County Singers, along with a few notes about each selection. The songs are grouped here by recording session and then how they were paired together as opposite sides of a 78-rpm record. I've also listed the matrix and Okeh label numbers so you can track the recording and release sequence.

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BLUE RIDGE MOUNTAIN HOME

VE HEAVEN

WHEN YOU PLAYED THE ORGAN

HENRY'S MADE A LADY OUT OF LIZZIE

I JUST ROLL ALONG

IS SHE MY GIRL FRIEND

Diane

TOGETHER

THE CHURCH BELLS ARE RINGING FOR HIM

About half of the songs have been re-released on reissue compilations, most notably "Virginia Roots: The 1929 Richmond Sessions" (Outhouse Records, Outhouse 1001), "Goodbye Babylon" (Dust to Digital, DTD-01), and "Rural String Bands of Virginia" (County Records, County CD-3502). However, the remaining songs are found only on the original 78s (and, occasionally, YouTube). So far as I know, the sister CD that accompanies this zine is the first time that all of the songs by Bela Lam and His Greene County Singers have been grouped and gathered together in one place.

This is everything we have by those strange and haunted musicians.

New York, 7&8 July, 1927

On the Resurrection Morning we Shall Rise
(81141-A) (OKeh 45145)

Hymn of personal salvation that tells most of its story in the title. The origin of this one is murky. There are other, older hymns called "On The Resurrection Morning," and "we Shall Rise," but this ain't them

Sweet Story of Old (81148-B) (OKeh 45145)
Originally titled "The Child's Desire," this is the most famous song written by Jemima Luke. It was first published in 1841. Jesus the shepherd brings the children into His flock.

-

Row Us Over The Tide (81142-A) (OKeh 45126)

There are a lot of kids in these songs. Most all of them are stuck in really shitty scenes. Seems like everyone but the boatman is dead. I don't think you can swim over that river. I hope he gives them a ride.

The larger the order the less your postage per pound

See That My Grave Is Kept Green (81150-A)

(OKeh 45126)

This was recorded three months before Blind Lemon Jefferson put down "See That My Grave Is Kept CLEAN." Besides the similarities in the title and portions of the refrain, there doesn't seem to be much of a relationship between the two. It could be that they're linked by an earlier song, now lost. Or maybe that phrase and feeling was just in the air. This is a post-Civil War song from the time when the whole country was a graveyard. It still is, if you think about it.

-

Poor Little Bennie (81143-B) (OKeh 45136)

This is a savage temperance song. The narrator's kid brother is dying (and dead) and nobody seems to know where Daddy got off to at this sad hour. Spoiler alert: he's down at the bar. From 1864.

May, Dearest May (81149-B) (OKeh 45136)

This one has minstrel roots. The lyric and singing aren't quite as racist as some other versions of the song but it's still an awkward listen. The 'Dearest May' mentioned in "Yellow Rose of Texas" is a reference to the subject of this song.

-

When The Roll Is Called Up Yonder (81145-B)

(OKeh 45228)

A hymn from 1893 about personal salvation. The singer is ready for heaven Are You? All of your favorite country singers have done this one. All of them.

Follow Jesus (81146-B) (OKeh 45228)

Christian soldiers suiting up and leaving for battle. This is gospel with a missionary message: "march on and fight with all your might."

-

Little Maud (81147-B) (OKeh 45177)

This one is weird, man. I'm not really sure what's going on. Maud's missing -- I Think -- probably dead -- I Guess, judging from what happens to everyone else in these records. A bunch of other bad stuff happened, too. Are these verses from the same song?

Sweet Bye and Bye (81151-A) (OKeh 45177)
Chances are this is the one you knew already. A popular hymn from 1868 that was written by Joseph Webster and S. Fillmore Bennett from ELKHORN Wisconsin.

Richmond, 15 October, 1929

Tell It Again (403124-B) (OKeh 45456)

A gypsy boy on his deathbed hears the salvation story for the first time. His dying wish is to hear it again. This is a Musical Million song.

If Tonight Should End The world (403126-B) (OKeh 45456)

Another salvation song but this time the person who needs to get their shit together is YOU! The imagery is rad: falling skies, warnings from the moon, and another boat sailing for heaven.

--*

Glory Bye and Bye (403126-B) (OKeh 45407)

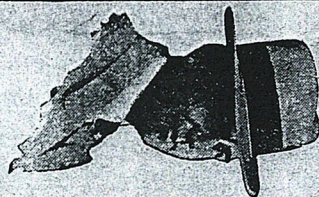
An example of 'broken singing' where different lyric lines are sung at the same time and overlap. That's Alva's guitar picked at the bridge to make that sound of shallow bells. "watch and pray, night and day."

Crown Him (403127-A) (OKeh 45407)

A standard hymn with an 18th century lyric from Edward Perronet. Someone -- maybe Bela? -- has switched the lyric to the first person. They sing: "we shall crown Him Lord of all," and they sing it all together.

Records Typical of Old Time (Hill Billy) Tunes

Songs by Vernon Dalhart



8134	Death of Floy'd Collins	8136	The Prisoner's Song	8160	I'll Never Be Yours	8186	When I Was Single My Pocket
8135	A Letter Eddied In Black	8137	Sad Love	8161	You'll Never Be Mine	8187	When I Was Single My Pocket
8136	Both by Dalhart	8138	The Prisoner's Song	8162	Both by Dalhart	8188	The Knoxville Girl
8137	Both by Dalhart	8139	When the Moon Shines Down	8163	Just as the Sun Went Down	8189	Both by Dalhart
8138	Both by Dalhart	8140	When the Moon Shines Down	8164	Both by Dalhart	8190	Both by Dalhart
8139	Both by Dalhart	8141	When the Sun Goes Down Again	8165	Both by Dalhart	8191	Both by Dalhart
8140	Both by Dalhart	8142	When the Sun Goes Down Again	8166	Both by Dalhart	8192	Both by Dalhart
8141	Both by Dalhart	8143	When the Sun Goes Down Again	8167	Both by Dalhart	8193	Both by Dalhart
8142	Both by Dalhart	8144	When the Sun Goes Down Again	8168	Both by Dalhart	8194	Both by Dalhart
8143	Both by Dalhart	8145	When the Sun Goes Down Again	8169	Both by Dalhart	8195	Both by Dalhart
8144	Both by Dalhart	8146	When the Sun Goes Down Again	8170	Both by Dalhart	8196	Both by Dalhart
8145	Both by Dalhart	8147	When the Sun Goes Down Again	8171	Both by Dalhart	8197	Both by Dalhart
8146	Both by Dalhart	8148	When the Sun Goes Down Again	8172	Both by Dalhart	8198	Both by Dalhart
8147	Both by Dalhart	8149	When the Sun Goes Down Again	8173	Both by Dalhart	8199	Both by Dalhart
8148	Both by Dalhart	8150	When the Sun Goes Down Again	8174	Both by Dalhart	8200	Both by Dalhart
8149	Both by Dalhart	8151	When the Sun Goes Down Again	8175	Both by Dalhart	8201	Both by Dalhart
8150	Both by Dalhart	8152	When the Sun Goes Down Again	8176	Both by Dalhart	8202	Both by Dalhart
8151	Both by Dalhart	8153	When the Sun Goes Down Again	8177	Both by Dalhart	8203	Both by Dalhart
8152	Both by Dalhart	8154	When the Sun Goes Down Again	8178	Both by Dalhart	8204	Both by Dalhart
8153	Both by Dalhart	8155	When the Sun Goes Down Again	8179	Both by Dalhart	8205	Both by Dalhart
8154	Both by Dalhart	8156	When the Sun Goes Down Again	8180	Both by Dalhart	8206	Both by Dalhart
8155	Both by Dalhart	8157	When the Sun Goes Down Again	8181	Both by Dalhart	8207	Both by Dalhart
8156	Both by Dalhart	8158	When the Sun Goes Down Again	8182	Both by Dalhart	8208	Both by Dalhart
8157	Both by Dalhart	8159	When the Sun Goes Down Again	8183	Both by Dalhart	8209	Both by Dalhart
8158	Both by Dalhart	8160	When the Sun Goes Down Again	8184	Both by Dalhart	8210	Both by Dalhart
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Postscript

Carry this zine over to a computer or pull out your phone and jump on to the YouTube. Next to the tiny magnifying glass type: "Bela Lam Family Poor Little Benny." Hit RETURN/ENTER and choose the black and white movie clip.

what you're watching is film footage of Bela and Rose Lam outside of their cabin on 17 February 1930. Bela begins by asking "what are we gonna sing and play now?" and Jesus Christ imagine how many times he asked that same question, surrounded by family, in those very same hills. Rose is wearing her nice coat. She chooses a tune called "Poor Little Bennie" that they recorded during that first session in New York, 2½ years earlier. instantly they're into it.

The film was made by a company called Movietone News. Movietone made newsreels but there's no record of them ever using this footage or even word as to why they recorded it in the first place. It's fascinating and eerie and timeless. Is this 88 years ago or 200? Bela's voice blends with Rose's but their expressions are frozen stern. Partly that's their style, of course, but also you know it's cold on top of that goddamn February mountain.

Sitting on the chair is Alva's daughter Arlene. I don't think she sings but it sure seems like she's been there before, sitting between her grandparents while they share songs and stories. It's so familiar that she maybe lets out a little yawn there towards the end. Probably she's wondering: why are these people here watching my grandparents sing these old, weird songs?

Because everybody wants to see a ghost.

//



